

New Mexican Spanish Feasts

83 New Mexican Spanish Feasts

JUAN B. RAEL

Popular Spanish traditions and customs which up to 1910 enjoyed undisputed sway among New Mexicans ¹ have been losing ground rapidly during the last three decades. This is not true of all, but it is true of many of the most colorful, especially those of a religious character. Some of these customs have disappeared with dizzying rapidity. Many a custom dating back to the Spanish Colonial period and even to the Middle Ages has disappeared almost completely in the brief period of a decade. On the other hand, there are certain practices which, though seemingly an anachronism in the changing life environment of New Mexicans, are so deeply rooted in the lives of the people and have so great an appeal to the popular fancy that they continue to be as popular as ever.

¹ This article has reference to the customs in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado and, particularly, in the New Mexican village of Arroyo Hondo, and many of the things stated here do not necessarily apply to other parts of New Mexico.

Among the traditions and customs that are on the verge of disappearing is a feast dating back to the 13th century that is particularly interesting because of the manner in which it has evolved. This feast is usually known as *La Percíngula*, but it is also called the two forms are New Mexican variants of the Spanish *Porciúncula* (from Italian).

Porciúncula, Italian diminutive form of *porción*, was the name given to a small portion of the land in the neighborhood of Assisi, Italy, which the monks of St. Benedict gave to St. Francis. It was also the name given to the little chapel in ruins on that piece of land, the place where St. Francis experienced his religious vocation. It was in this chapel, which the saint restored from a dilapidated state to a habitable dwelling, that he received revelations and supernatural grace from God. For this reason he always spoke of it with the greatest

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of reverence, advising his followers never to abandon it and declaring that whosoever should pray in it with fervor would be heard.

The name *Porciúncula* was also given to the plenary indulgence that could be gained by visiting this sanctuary on August 2d. This grace, 84 according to tradition, was granted to St. Francis by Christ in 1221. Shortly afterward it was recognized canonically by Pope Honorius III, who set August 2d of each year as the date on which the visit to the temple should be made. Later, the time was extended so that the visit could be made at any time between the afternoon of August 1st and sunset of the following day. The indulgence could be gained at first only in the *Porciúncula*, but in 1480 Pope Sixtus IV extended it to all the churches of the First and Second Orders of St. Francis, and in 1622 Pope Gregory XV granted the same privilege to all the churches of the Capuchins. The act of devotion that was to be performed consisted of confession, the receiving of Holy Communion, and the visitation of one of the churches designated. Later in the same century the privilege was extended not only to all the churches of the Third Order, but also to all churches with which the Franciscans were connected in any way, including non-Franciscan churches in which the Third Order held its meetings. 2 It must have been through this channel that the observance of the feast was brought to New Mexico by the early Spanish settlers, for the *penitentes* or flagellant brothers, the sponsors of the feast in New Mexico, appear to be an outgrowth of the Third Order of St. Francis. The strange thing about the existence of the feast in New Mexico is that it is not general. In fact, I know of only one place where it is observed either in southern Colorado or in New Mexico, and that is in the little town of Arroyo Hondo, about eighty miles north of Santa Fe and about forty miles south of the Colorado—New Mexico boundary.

2 For more detailed information regarding the history of *La Porciúncula* outside of New Mexico, consult either *The Catholic Encyclopedia* or the *Enciclopedia universal ilustrada*, edited by Hijos de J. Espasa, Barcelona.

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The feast is observed under the auspices of the flagellant brothers, who take full charge of all the ceremonies, though anyone may partake in it. Formerly, according to one of my informers, the preparations were in the hands of some kind of lay sisters—apparently female members of the flagellant organization, but my informer was vague about them. At present, the preparations are under the direct care of several *mayordomos* or sponsors selected from among the *Penitente* brotherhood.

In the village of Arroyo Hondo a double observance of the feast is held. In this place there are two plazas, both of which are hemmed in by flat-roofed adobe houses, as is usual in most New Mexican villages. The two plazas are about a mile apart from each other and each has its own *morada*, or chapter house. Since their origin, there has always been a certain amount of rivalry between the two branches, and on religious feast days each one celebrates the particular feast independently of the other. With regard to *La Porciúncula*, this was not always the case. Previous to 1902, the feast was observed only in the place where the main church is situated, and under the auspices of the *morada* near the church; but in that year the double celebration of the feast came into being.

The feast is observed on the eve of August 2d and the ceremonies consist of a *velorio* or wake. The wake begins after it grows dark. Prayers are recited and *alabados* 3 *luminarias* or bonfires, which were lighted just as the procession started.

3 There are some two hundred *alabados* in circulation. Some of them are really traditional religious ballads. The *alabados* are found in manuscript form, though some of them exist also in oral tradition. The *alabados* are usually sung with musical accompaniment, and there are different melodies for most of them. With the exception of a few, which come from church hymnbooks, the majority of these melodies have never been published. The present writer has made recordings thus far of some sixty, and he and Dean J. L. Kittle of the Adams State Teachers College, Alamosa, Colorado, are now preparing them for publication.

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Shortly before the church procession began, another procession from the *morada*, a quarter of a mile away, got under way. In this procession, only the members of the flagellant brotherhood took part. In it there were usually eight or ten barefooted *penitentes*, naked above the waist. The only clothing they wore was a pair of homemade drawers, and a handkerchief with which they covered their faces. These flagellants scourged themselves, as the procession progressed, with disciplines made from the palmlike leaves of the *amole* or soap plant. Seldom did they ever carry the *maderos*, or heavy wooden crosses, used in their other religious ceremonies. The flagellants were accompanied by other members of the fraternity dressed in their usual street clothes. The accompanying brothers sang an *alabado*, or a member of the organization played an *alabado* melody on a homemade flute. This group joined the end of the main procession, which advanced slowly around the church. During the procession, the rosary was recited out loud by the faithful, a leader reciting the first part of the "Our Father" and the "Hail Mary" and the rest of the people reciting the second part. Before the beginning of each decade, the appropriate mystery was sung, during which the procession stopped. When the 86 singing of the mystery ended, the recitation of the rosary continued and the procession advanced slowly. The progress of the procession around the church was timed so that the recitation of the rosary should end just as the head of the procession reached the main entrance to the church once more. The people entered the church and the flagellant brothers returned to the *morada* in the same manner in which they had come. Thereafter, the singing of *alabados* continued throughout the night. Toward midnight, dinner was served in a neighboring house. The dinner was prepared under the direction of the sponsors and at the expense of all the members of the fraternity. Everybody, whether a member of the community or a stranger, was invited to partake of the repast.

morada. The self-flagellation went on in the church as well as during the procession. As to what took place in the *morada*, no one knows, for only the members of the society are permitted to enter on such occasions and they keep absolute secrecy about their

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indoor ceremonies. At the wake the singing of *alabados* went on till dawn, at which time everybody went home.

I have spoken to many of the old folk who have been taking part in this solemnity for years and have tried to learn from them about its origin, history, and meaning, but with scarcely any results. Even the name of the feast, *percíngula* or *precíngula*, is of no special significance to the people, and naturally they know nothing about the indulgence granted to those who observed the feast in the manner prescribed by the Church. 87 Of course, in a village such as Arroyo Hondo, which has almost always been without a priest, the fulfillment of the prescribed requirements was practically impossible. It was only natural, then, for the people to substitute some other form of devotion. The reason for the lack of information on the part of the people is that no written records were kept and that the members of the brotherhood, independent of the Church as they have nearly always been in New Mexico, did not have the clergy to remind them from time to time about the meaning and nature of the solemnity. The practice was carried down from generation to generation as a mere routine till sight was lost of the original purpose of the feast.

There are other feasts and practices that are suffering the same fate as *La Porciúncula*. The custom of performing a religious folk play at the Christmas holidays, for example, is dying out. In former days, either of two dramas was performed: *Los Pastores*, which deals with the Nativity, or *El Niño Perdido*, which deals with the finding of Our Lord in the Temple. The latter play is no longer performed at all, but the former still enjoys a high degree of popularity. The reason for this is that *Los Pastores*, many of whose characters are shepherds, has a stronger human appeal than *El Niño Perdido*, and reflects to an appreciable degree the lives of many of the people in that region. Furthermore, incorporated in this play are certain songs with melodies that have always appealed to the popular fancy, so much so that nearly everyone knows them by heart. This naturally keeps the interest in the play alive.

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Another feast that used to be observed by the performance of a religious folk play was that of the Epiphany, on January 6th. The play acted was *Los Reyes Magos*, the Magi. Compared to the two dramas previously mentioned, this one seems to have been the least popular, and, as far as I have been able to ascertain, it has not been performed in southern Colorado or northern New Mexico during the last thirty years.

As for the Lenten Friday devotions and the Holy Week solemnities, they continue to be observed, but in a form much modified over that of thirty years ago. The public processions in which the *penitentes* appeared, scouring themselves or carrying heavy crosses, have been suppressed in nearly all New Mexican villages, and all the other ceremonies are observed in a much smaller scale than formerly. For the modification of these ceremonies, and for that matter those pertaining to *La Porciúncula* also, there are several reasons. The *penitentes* are rapidly decreasing in numbers, and as a consequence all the ceremonies of the organization have declined in popularity among the inhabitants of the different villages. 88 Furthermore, many of the people who attend these feasts now are not drawn to them out of devotion, as formerly, but out of curiosity, and they often act disrespectfully and sometimes even cause disturbances. The members of the organization, sensing this disrespectful if not hostile attitude, have withdrawn more and more from before the public eye. The suppression of many of the ceremonies is also due to the unwelcome presence of outsiders who, eager for excitement, have not only intruded upon the privacy of the organization, but often have gone so far as to interrupt its ceremonies.

Other feast days that are still observed, besides those already mentioned, are those of St. Anthony, St. John, St. James, and St. Ann.

On the feast days of St. Anthony and St. John, which occur respectively on June 13th and June 24th, it is customary to have a procession across the cultivated fields. In these processions the image of the saint as well as that of the Lord or the Virgin are carried by the faithful, and prayers are said in order that the people may be blessed with good

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crops. The procession lasts nearly all day, and in the evening, sometimes, there is a wake in honor of the saint. The wake may take place in a chapel or in the home of one of the faithful.

Of more importance than the feast days of St. Anthony and St. John, as far as their popularity is concerned, though of less religious significance, are the feasts of St. James and St. Ann, which occur on July 25th and 26th, respectively. Formerly, an outdoor game known as *correr gallo*,

Aside from the feasts above mentioned, most of which are observed in nearly all New Mexican villages, every town has its own patron saint, whose feast day it generally commemorates in its own way, often with games and dancing, but nearly always with a wake.

89

Among the nonreligious feasts, those pertaining to weddings are particularly interesting. The typical New Mexican wedding ceremonies usually extend over two days: the day preceding the wedding, known as *el día del prendorio*, and the wedding day, referred to as *el día del casorio*.

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4 Wedding feasts of this kind are fashionable not only among people of moderate means but also among the very poor.

90

Entrega de novios, and is so named because the bride and bridegroom are returned once more to their parents and placed under their guidance. When all the guests have crowded around the bride and bridegroom, a singer begins to sing a wedding song to the newlyweds, informing them of the significance of their new state of life. 5

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5 For more information regarding these songs, consult Juan B. Rael, "New Mexican Wedding Songs," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. IV, No. 2, June, 1940.

coplas (quatrains made up of eight-syllable lines with assonance on the second and fourth lines) in honor of that person. The person serenaded invites the serenaders into his house and gives them refreshments. The crowd then moves on to another house, sometimes walking long distances from farmhouse to farmhouse. This serenading, which begins at midnight, often continues till about eight in the morning.

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CALIFORNIA FOLKLORE QUARTERLY

VOLUME I · NUMBER 1

January, 1942

Contents

PAGE

A Platform 3

The Recording of Folk Music in California Sidney Robertson Cowell 7

Wayland D. Hand 24 Bertrand H. Bronson 47

Notes on the Riddle in China Richard C. Rudolph 65

New Mexican Spanish Feasts Juan B. Rael 83

George Ezra Dane 91

Notes and Queries 94

Collectors and Collections 99

Library of Congress

Reviews of Books 102

California Folklore Quarterly

FEB - 7 °1942 ©CI 8 530803

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The California Folklore Quarterly is published by the University of California Press for the California Folklore Society. Each volume will have approximately five hundred pages of text matter per year, and articles will be printed in the field of folklore in conformity with the principles laid down in the objectives of the Society. Contributions will be accepted from all sources and not necessarily solely from professional folklorists. Editorial matters should be taken up either with Professor Archer Taylor, University of California, Berkeley, or with Professor Gustave O. Arlt, University of California, Los Angeles.

The *California Folklore Quarterly*

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The *California Folklore Quarterly*